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Art Reinvented: Connecting Back to Mother Nature

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Mary Mattingly is a New York based visual artist and a recipient of the Yale University of Art Fellowship. Mary's work is a fusion of sculpture, public space, and habitable ecosystem, and portrays the intricate relationship between humans and the environment. This is reflected in her projects including the WetLand, Triple Island, Waterpod Project, Flock House Project, and Pull. These exhibits are not only unique pieces of art but also mobile environments and independent living systems.



WetLand is a sculpture built on a floating vessel, but it is also a structure and public space, in which people can live with access to food, water, and energy. WetLand is now also a popular place in Philadelphia for people to visit and experience. What sparked the idea for WetLand? How do you see this concept evolving in the future?

Attention to the social and environmental impacts involved in material production, distribution, use, and disposal are important to the formation of WetLand, which was built entirely from the urban waste stream. I want WetLand to augment local community movements by attracting a broad range of people with different backgrounds to the space, and by being a site from which to organize collaborations. WetLand can re-address water as a commons by engaging with students who steward the space, collect data relating to energy use and production, and test and maintain the project's water systems. It is an argument for a thriving local urban environment, and it stresses how important it is for more people to be involved in caring for our common home. In the future, WetLand's floating gardens should be perennial, requiring less labor to maintain and growing more robust each year. WetLand should change as people spend time on it, and adapt to the current users' needs.

The project is not only a work of artistic expression, it requires an understanding of science and technology to maintain it, to generate power in the system, for example. How did you accomplish this?

WetLand resembles a partially submerged building that integrates nature with urban space. The interior contains a living space, workspace, and performance space. WetLand's overall ecosystem includes rainwater collection and purification, greywater filtration, dry compost systems, outdoor vegetable gardens, indoor hydroponic gardens, and floating gardens circling the perimeter. The project depends on collaboration, including partnerships with an electrical engineer named Rand Weeks and an appropriate technology engineer named Lonny Grafman. Karla Stingerstein designed floating wetlands that lined WetLand's perimeter.


From a very early point in your artistic career, you explored and presented the relationship between humanity and nature, like your waterpod project in New York which is a barge-based public space and self-sufficient habitat. How do you see art acting as a bridge that can help humanity reconnect with nature and overcome the worst impacts of the Anthropocene?

These projects experiment with co-creating something by bringing people working within different disciplines together. In these projects, it's important to find a place for everyone's skills and how they can complement a process of co-building. This doesn't exclude companies or governmental agencies, often engaged in order to help permit or provide resources for the projects. When different groups see the value in this work, and in conserving natural systems, we can strengthen forms of creativity, community, and commons.

If every Philadelphian had a chance to visit the WetLand site and could learn one thing from being there, what would it be? What lesson would you be proudest of conveying to your audience?

The value of interdependence with each other and with nature, including the water WetLand floats upon. How important it is for us to play a role in protecting the vulnerable, because we all need each other for healthy survival.

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Of all your creations, which one did you find the most challenging in terms of translating your ideas into actual piece(s) of art? Which one is your favorite and why?

They are all challenging for me. While they all build upon each other, there isn't really a hierarchy. Short or long-term, the projects we do inform future projects and strengthen past projects, those we make and those that others make – they can actualize alternatives and different types of coalitions.

The times that we live in are truly challenging and unsettling. How do you extract your inspirations from a world that is so chaotic and abstract?

This work feels urgent and necessary to me. It's more about need.

What would be your message for the youth in terms of their role towards environmental sustainability? How can students get involved in your projects?

Well, with WetLand, students from UPenn are running the logistics, programming, and new projects onboard. They are transforming it into the space they want to see and work with. I believe in that flexibility and in what Joseph Beuys called Living Sculpture. With Swale right now, we work with Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice in the Bronx. Their younger adults led by Brandon Kane and Anthony Lespier are taking steps to making a co-op to potentially run Swale in the future. They can really take projects like these to another level.